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# **Indigenous Epistemology - Creating an International Indigenous Higher Education Space in the Wake of the Western “University of Excellence”**

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## ***Abstract***

*Interest in the participation of Indigenous peoples in higher education has, in recent times, gained momentum with an increasing number of advocates challenging the global history of culturally inept policies and practices imposed within the western higher education system. To address the challenges being presented by Indigenous communities and other groups (often relegated under the banner of disadvantaged or equity) Western Universities are promoting a shift toward inclusive policies and practices. Frustrated with the offerings of the Western Higher Education system, a global movement of Indigenous academics, Elders and knowledge holders are developing strategies to meet the educational needs of their own communities, in order to find a way forward. The mobilization of Elders and Indigenous academics has resulted in the development of a global higher education network which is proving to be a significant force in changing the position of Indigenous participation in higher education. The World Indigenous Network Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) has presented a significant challenge to those barriers within the western higher education system that has historically demonstrated an inability to develop culturally inclusive practices within their institutions. This paper examines the development of a world Indigenous higher education movement and its contribution to the history of the “university” within the context of western higher education institutions. Outlined in this examination will be a synopsis of the development of the “University of Excellence” and the creation of an international Indigenous space within higher education.*

**Key Words: Indigenous Epistemologies, World Indigenous Higher Education, Inclusive practices**

## **Introduction**

The structure of a university based upon a commitment to teaching and research as a mechanism to obtain an objective analysis of issues came into being in nineteenth-century Germany, laying the foundations for the dominant model that is evident in contemporary society. Historically the concept of the university became the beacon of social elitism as access to education was based upon both a social and gender bias. With the influence of various advocacy movements calling for greater equity in accessing education, universities eventually moved to a system where women and men were able to enjoy the benefits of tertiary education and intellectual freedom in research and teaching and independent disciplines with their own standards and priorities became the norm.

The Robbins report (Committee on Higher Education (1963) sought to democratize the model without radically changing it, and until the 1980s university expansion was contained within this pattern, with polytechnics providing an alternative ideal.

Research has increasingly become detached from teaching, and the concentration of research funding widens the divisions within the system. Demands for research to be economically and socially relevant challenge accepted views of academic freedom.

The end of the binary system in 1988 brought together liberal and vocational forms of education. In Britain, unlike many other advanced countries, policy is opposed to the recognition of hierarchies within the higher education system, though in reality there are wide variations of social and intellectual prestige, Anderson “The 'Idea of a University' Today” (1968). Although universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may claim to have found an ideal nexus between both historical and contemporary values, there continues to be a distinct cultural and social disparity in the transformative processes that have taken place.

As part of the process of developing pedagogies in the 21st century that accommodates the diverse needs of students, universities need to move beyond the traditional educational framework and adopt an approach that encompasses research, teaching and administrative practices that are transformative and cross-culturally apt. In order to provide such a facility, Universities need to re-evaluate the appropriateness of their research, teaching and learning models and re-conceptualise alternative pedagogies and their underlying epistemologies.

Despite all efforts over the past 3 decades to cater for such change, universities have demonstrated an inability to keep pace with the changing social and cultural requirements within its student cohort.

Globally, Indigenous educators and Elders concerned with the cultural ineptness of the western university system are embracing the challenge of developing a bicultural educational framework. This will equip students with the skills and knowledge that encompass both western and cultural pedagogical requirements, reinforcing the student sense of cultural identity and scholarship of Indigenous knowledge.

If we track the Humboldtian University of Culture (Humboldt, 1791-2 (though it was not published until 1850, after Humboldt's death)) and Newman's Knowledge University (1873) to today's “University of Excellence”, it would appear that the contemporary University serves nothing other than being a self serving corporation more aligned to a world of transnational exchanged capital. The globalised notion of the 'University of Excellence' is sweeping 'culture' out into the open in terms of current debate and the changing nature of what is deemed to be people friendly within higher education as *excellence* defines the terms of reference, perversely transcends an imminent culture. For Indigenous people a University sector devoid of 'culture', *excellence* becomes an institutional goal that is difficult to accomplish.

Whilst a number of factors have contributed to a cultural ineptness in the University sector, Indigenous epistemology has a clearly defined canon based on a triadic relationship of people, land and spirituality that is not only impenetrable to market forces but it has the potential to shape those very same market forces in the dissemination and practice of cultural knowledge. A University of Excellence that is respectful of Indigenous knowledge not only provides an environment where Indigenous students can achieve excellence within the

confines of a western framework, but can also be a conduit to the adoption of more traditional form of administration within the university.

Since the 1850s there have been two streams of thought that have existed, often in conflict on the idea of “what constitutes” a University. The first relies on epistemology and culture while the second is an economic/utilitarian/technological argument.

The publication by John Henry Newman (1873) “The Idea of the University” first appeared as a lecture series in 1854. A further analysis was documented by Jaroslav Pelikan in his publications “The Idea of the University: A Re-examination” and “The Christian Tradition”. Pelikan, a professor of history at Yale, conducts an ongoing dialogue with John Henry Cardinal Newman's book “The Idea of a University”. Written more than 150 years ago by the towering 19th century thinker whose efforts to establish a Catholic university in Dublin were cruelly frustrated, Newman's book offers illuminating parallels to, and contrasts with the current university crises. Pelikan drew further attention to these issues in latter publications wherein he adhered to the format of Newman's discourses, embracing their theological as well as scholarly dimensions as he sought to characterize the university's aims, functions, and place in society. Pelikan considers the interrelations of knowledge and technology, the conflict between ideology and pluralism and the need for community felt by teachers and students--concerns as pressing in Newman's day as they are now. Shaped by Pelikan's personal identification with Newman, whom he calls "the most influential English-speaking theologian who ever lived," calls for a traditional understanding of the University that is mainly based on epistemology.

Since the failure of the 1968 Paris Commune/Revolution, the traditional home of social critique, the University has been in crisis. The Universalism of Newman et al has shattered leaving a fractured philosophical school in the humanities, the social sciences and to some extent science. Paradise Lost or postponed? Since the theoreticians have been unable to supply a sustained agenda on the role of thought in society, the counter-revolutionaries, that is the technocrats of the state have opened up the academy to market forces. Since then the University has been developed along capitalist/economic lines. It has conformed to the needs of Industry since the 1850s but it was not until 1968 that this idea had become triumphant. This is further complicated by the role of the University expanding after the 1950s and the introduction of working class students that did not take up the agenda of class struggle of the theoreticians but conformed to the needs of the state (contra see Herbert Marcuse (1964) “The One Dimensional Man”).

Wisenschaft (or the theory of academic disciplines) has been developed by critics but largely ignored by University administration. In the last 50 years the most important works in this field have been:

- Polyani's *Personal Knowledge*, 1958
- Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, 1960
- Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962
- Luckmann and Berger's *The Social Construction of Reality*, 1966
- Foucault's *The Order of Things*, 1966 and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969

- Habermas' *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 1968
- Toulmin's *Human Understanding*, 1972

None of these texts have had any influence in the construction of academic disciplines since 1968. The University of the Critique has given way to the University of Technology, which is the Technology of the capitalist state. Collegiality has been replaced by managerial and policy dominance, prioritising administrative dominance. The Office of Vice-Chancellor, once deemed to be a position of educational reverence, has increasingly developed into that of a Chief Executive Officer of a corporate institution.

In Australia this reached its logical conclusions with a number of political strategies but the one that is of most prominence is the Dawkins' Report in 1988, a white paper by the then Minister for Education. Dawkins merged the parallel systems of technology and critique by imposing market demand on Higher Learning Institutions through the redistribution of funds for research and teaching in addition to the amalgamation of both systems. The merger between the Institutes of Technology and Colleges of Advanced Education with the Universities led to learning communities becoming strictly demarcated between consumers and producers and the "Newman styled Universities" being replaced with the "University of Excellence".

This has however left an unique opportunity for Indigenous people. During this time of change Indigenous Epistemology has not experienced a similar crisis but rather a renaissance can be observed, possibly due to the Western epistemologies heightened sense of scepticism. Due to sustained coherence through people, land and spirituality and the struggle for existence, Indigenous epistemology has flourished in the New University. It has not succumbed to market forces because of:

- The demarcation between producers and consumers has not been able to usurp Indigenous people's sense of community, culture and tradition;
- Indigenous interpretative strategies have the ability to subvert market technologies for the service of Indigenous people;
- The Indigenous University has been able to bridge the gap between the New University of Excellence and the traditional Idea of the University through the sustaining coherence of Indigenous Epistemologies;
- The struggle for Indigenous education facilities has not been to conform to the market but rather to demand that the market conform to Indigenous epistemology.

While education within the western university has increasingly become a commodity that can be influenced by market forces, Indigenous education is underpinned by community practices and cultural protocols that have helped to sustain Indigenous identity and heritage.

The transition by western universities, in more recent times, to adopt more culturally inclusive practices and curriculum may provide some comfort that a systemic change is afoot. However, little can be accomplished to meet the educational needs of Indigenous people while commodity driven forces underpin the "University of Excellence". This anomaly has

provided an opportunity for Indigenous peoples to redefine the educational needs of their communities and to develop institutions based upon their own epistemologies.

### **Indigenous Hermeneutics; the reinterpretation of the ‘University of Excellence’ through the context of the Indigenous Community**

For Indigenous people culture is ‘a priori’ it is not something that is naturalised by dominance but rather an historical process that is defined by a distinct community of descent rather than assent. It is passed on from Elders to the young. It has defined knowledge systems that have external and internal framework that is taught in specific cultural contexts and place. Anything that is non-referential in the new University has the potential to be re-interpreted by Indigenous Knowledge to serve the needs of the Indigenous community.

To exemplify this, The University of Excellence, exists within a market of entrepreneurial teachers and discerning consumers thus a major concern for the new University is the way in which it can provide both western and cultural assurance of quality and accreditation. In her paper *Remembering our Future: Higher Education Quality Assurance and Indigenous Epistemology* (2005) Manu Meyer of the University of Hawaii argues that due to the unfixed meaning of “Quality and Assurance” with regard to higher education systems, Indigenous people are not only able to colonize these practices through a Indigenous hermeneutic based on culture, but also to bring about a transformative higher learning that moves from ...*chaos into coherence, justice into healing, and individuation into interdependence*. Meyer further comments “*the Triangulation of Meaning, an ancient way to exhibit an embodied epistemology extending into spiritual acumen is brought forth to invigorate indigeneity and its role in the world awakening*”.

The global mobilization of Indigenous higher education through bodies such as WINHEC and community tribal colleges and universities are presenting a challenge to the western “University of Excellence” as they take charge of their own education that is inclusive of their own cultural hermeneutics. This is excellence indeed!

### **Who is the consumer and who is the producer?**

Indigenous anthropology does not rely on Cartesian notions of the self; therefore reduction of culture into individuals buying and selling in a market place has little use. Under Contract Law even a corporation is understood as an individual. This type of market lacks any coherence within an Indigenous context. This is not to say that the market does not have coherence but protocols of human interdependence or reciprocity take precedence in determining identity and the market. In the new University a strict demarcation between producers and consumers of knowledge has become necessary to conform to western notions of the market. This opposes historical notions of the University being a knowledge community with a free interplay of ideas, values, knowledge systems and epistemologies.

This demarcation has failed to take a hold within the Indigenous space of the New University. A question that never seems to be asked is ... *Does the market need to conform to Western Individuality?* Indigenous economic and exchange systems have existed for millennia but due to the retention of protocols involving reciprocity Indigenous knowledge systems have not suffered from exploitation or alienation. Indigenous communities do not demarcate between

producers and consumers, nor is knowledge something that can be individually owned as often evident within a western system. Rather, within an Indigenous framework there is an undeniable link between respect and knowledge and between knowledge and responsibility to the community. These are the guiding principles of knowledge exchange. In Indigenous Knowledge Exchange it is possible to a return to the traditional knowledge community of Newman within the University of Excellence that incorporates both students and teachers.

### **Indigenous Assimilation of Capitalism: Is this a way forward for the University of Excellence?**

Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. (Article 14, UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2008)

In recent years there has been conjecture by non-Indigenous commentators for Indigenous communities to become more entrepreneurial and to conform to western ideas of economic exchange. What many of these commentators fail to realize is firstly, their own cultural bias in determining the protocols of the market and secondly, that it is not the market that should determine Indigenous culture and protocols but in fact the complete reverse. If Indigenous communities are to have any success in the global market it will be through the adoption of their own cultural protocols and epistemology within the structure of their own businesses and how they are run, not the other way around. This is yet to be realized and accepted by many people within Government and Universities advocating an interest in adopting more culturally astute policies and practices.

In the context of the “University”, does the prioritizing of culture and ideas devalue or enrich the market? This is an issue for the economists to grapple with within the western university framework. Across the globe there are numerous examples where the level of engagement and productivity of Indigenous people is substantially enhanced when Indigenous values, knowledge framework, culture and epistemologies are duly recognized. In these circumstances the rich contribution of Indigenous knowledge and knowledge holders are respected and valued. The inability of western education systems to adopt a bicultural education framework denies all students access to a more culturally enriched education.

The move by World Indigenous Network Higher Education Consortium to establish a Indigenous higher education institution offers a strategic and innovative opportunity for Indigenous students to participate in a global ‘University of Excellence’ based upon an epistemology that acknowledges the value of western and traditional knowledge systems. Such a model will require Indigenous leaders and educators to be visionaries, adopting an approach that provides a level of “quality and assurance” that meets bicultural standards; the aspirations of their people; protects and preserves traditional values, history and knowledge systems and produces graduates that are both professionally and culturally grounded and equipped.

### **Conclusion**

Indigenous people practice a culture of descent as opposed to western notions of ascent. Western epistemology has often failed to meet the challenges that intrinsically accompany the

service of culture due to its inability to coherently critique the changing market. The “New University” has ironically created a space for Indigenous epistemology due to the end of the systemic dominance of Western culture and the increasing search by students for a more culturally and professionally enriched education. Ironically, this may be interpreted by some to mean that the coherence of Indigenous culture is in a struggle to locate its place in a global educational context. Indigenous educators, however, recognize the fallacy in this regard. Indigenous epistemology is inherently anti-imperialist and it can provide a framework through which global economic trends can demarcate between the practice of the market and the shared human values that inform that market. This is a critical point within the delivery of services within higher education. It could be a way for the new “University of Excellence” to exist within 21<sup>st</sup> Century realities while offering a bridge to older notions of a University of Culture and Ideas. The determination by WINHEC to develop an international Indigenous higher education entity in its own right may also encourage western universities to adopt a more inclusive approach within the complexities that accompany a socially demanding and culturally challenging market. The WINHEC model will provide an economically and culturally viable educational framework that will readily accommodate the production of knowledge within a context of transformational policies and practices and competing market demands that underpin the concept of a socially responsive “University of Excellence”.

Note: This paper builds upon the unpublished paper by Robertson, B (2002) *Indigenous Epistemology within the University of Excellence: Living in the ruins of the Western University*.

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